Interview with HMC Richard Thacker, Vietnam hospital corpsman assigned to 3rd Platoon, Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, and present at the Battle of Hue. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 16 May 2005.

I thought we'd talk a little bit about your time as a corpsman with the Marines.
It's been 40 years but I think my memory's still there.

Where are you from originally?
I was born and raised in Sandersville, GA. It's in east central Georgia and is pretty much a rural town.

When did you enlist in the Navy?
In August 1965.

Had you decided before you enlisted that you wanted to be a corpsman, or was that something that just presented itself?
It did. First of all, I had an adventurous streak in me and I wanted to be a Marine. My mom and dad just absolutely went ballistic on me about it. I was at the recruiting office and a chief heard me when I was talking to the Marine recruiter and told him I couldn't join because my parents wouldn't let me. He said, "I have a way you can get around that. There's a Hospital Corps." And I always had an interest in medicine and I made the discovery that hospital corpsmen did time with the Marine Corps. And that's the way I got in there, and I loved every minute of it.

Where did you go to boot camp?
Great Lakes.

And you went to corps school right afterward right there at Great Lakes?
Yes.

Where was your first assignment after corps school?
I went to Naval Hospital Charleston, SC, for about 6 or 8 months and then got orders to FMF. I went to Camp Lejeune to Field Medical Service School. From there I got orders to the 5th Marine Division. They had just activated it at Camp Pendleton to take over from the 1st Marine Division. I went to the 5th Medical Battalion.

Do you remember the training at the Field Medical Service School?
It was 8 weeks and quite different from the Navy. There was more discipline. We had a drill instructor assigned to us. It was more physically demanding than the Navy, certainly. It honed us into being able to fit in with a Marine rifle company. They trained us to understand the concept of combat, how to treat patients under fire, and they really got into the Marine Corps. Basically, they made us into Marines. Later on, I was told that I was a Marine by my platoon. They all thought I was a Marine and not a corpsman. I was very flattered by that.

So you're now with the 5th Marine Division.

Yes. It was in its founding stages when I got out to Camp Pendleton.

When was that?

The fall of ''66. Then I got orders in January or February for the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam. I went home on leave, flew to Okinawa then went on to Danang.

What do you remember about arriving in Vietnam?

I think the movie *Platoon* wrapped it all up for me and a lot of other people I know. When the door of the C-130 opened up I remember the heat from the runway. The smells were entirely alien to what I was used to. There was an air strike going on on a hill in the distance. It was very, very hot and humid. There was a lot of anticipation. We didn't know where we were going.

Did you go with a unit or as a replacement?

As an individual replacement. They put us in this little staging shed area. A corpsman from the Division Surgeon's office came by and picked up our records and told us to wait there for our assignments. Three or four hours later he came back and I was told that I'd be assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which was in An Hoa. That was about 36 miles southwest of Danang. Since the roads were being ambushed really bad, they'd have to fly us out.

We flew out on a C-121, a little twin engine cargo plane. It was full of 55-gallon drums of gasoline they were delivering. I think there were five of us corpsmen that went.

Was this '67?

This was the 1st of April of '67.

And you reported to your unit.

I reported to the battalion aid station. From there I was assigned to Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. In Golf Company I was placed in 3rd Platoon. At that time--the summer of '67--we had lost so many Navy corpsmen wounded and killed over there that rifle companies did not have their full complement of corpsmen. I think a full complement for a reinforced rifle company meant seven corpsmen. At that time we had four corpsmen in the company. So there was one per platoon. That meant one man covering about 38 Marines.

Did you go out right away on patrols?

They kept us there for about 5 days to indoctrinate us to the area and our mission. On the fifth day I saddled up. My first operation was "Operation Allegator Lake." One night we made some minor contact with the enemy. We didn't lose any troops. It was just a hard hike in this hilly country area. There was very little water and that's what I remember most of all. It was a very tough go for someone who had just gotten over there. But I made it.

Did you carry a Unit 1?

We carried a Unit 1 medical bag but we found out really quick that it just didn't carry enough gear. When you were hit hard, you ran out of medical gear really quickly. So we supplemented it with ammo bandoliers full of battle dressings and ace bandages which we found out really gave a good compression dressing. We stuffed things in our pockets or wherever we could stuff extra gear. All the Marines in the company carried two extra battle dressings for us.

The platoon leader carried a couple of extra serum albumin containers for us. If we got hit with a really bad ambush, we took a lot of casualties real fast and we needed all that equipment.

Did you, yourself, carry any serum albumin?
Yes, I did. I carried six bottles of serum albumin.

Did you ever find a good use for it?
Absolutely, especially with some really bad wounds that were hemorrhaging really bad. Serum albumin was a great fluid volume expander. We didn't have plasma out in the field so we used that to stabilize our casualties until we got them to a more advanced medical facility.

I'm sure you must remember the first time you got into a real tangle with the enemy.
Yes, I do. During the summer, it was just patrols, small skirmishes, and lots and lots of amputations from booby traps.
In November of '67 we were in the Antenna Valley on "Operation Essex." My company and Hotel Company were trapped, pinned down, and surrounded all night long by a regiment of North Vietnamese soldiers. If I remember correctly, we had 20 or 30 KIAs and multiple wounded. It got to be where it was a hand-to-hand thing at times. They were trying to rush our positions and overrun us. It was a pretty hairy night.

These were NVA?
Yes.

So you had a lot of casualties to treat.
Yes, sir, lots of casualties that night. Two of our corpsmen were wounded really bad. One was hit in the arm and the other had his chest split open by a round. But they both survived.

Were you able to get medevacs in?
We couldn't get the wounded out until the next day. So we had to treat and maintain our casualties all night long. We were very busy. We would dig fox holes and put the casualties in there. We just had to treat casualties and continue making rounds on the ones already wounded and keep them stable.

When you say "we," how many other corpsmen were helping you?
Hotel Company and Golf Company had about eight corpsmen, something like that. There were two rifle companies. There were over 225 men, something like that.

Did you have enough medical supplies to keep these guys going until . . .?
Yes, because we had the Marines carry extra battle dressings for us. Therefore, we had more than enough. It worked out really well. We always had wonderful support as far as resupply.

So you called for some medevacs the next day?

The next day. We medevaced casualties out of the field all morning long. The NVA pulled out early that morning and left us. Then we had to police up our dead, triage our wounded, and get them out on choppers according to the seriousness of their wounds.

Where would they have taken them?

They had a field surgical unit for this operation set up over the mountains at An Hoa at our battalion aid station. If it was a really serious life-threatening thing, they would take them there because they had some surgeons there from Danang. From An Hoa, they would either go to the Naval Support Activity hospital in Danang, to the 1st Medical Battalion in Danang, or to one of the hospital ships.

When the medevac helos came in, the landing zones were secure because the NVA had already gone.

That morning they were unopposed. But the day before they were opposed. We had a helo with casualties on it that was almost shot down before we were completely surrounded. When he took off, I don't know how many tracers I saw go through the helicopter. But he was able to lift off the ground and get over the mountain to An Hoa.

Those were a bunch of brave fellows.

Those Marine helicopter pilots were just wonderful. I can't say enough about them.

So this all took place in November of '67.

November of '67. When that ambush was over, we stayed in the Antenna Valley and continued on the operation but we made very little contact after that. We celebrated the Marine Corps birthday--November 10th--in an abandoned village, which was quite an interesting thing. We stopped everything and they flew a birthday cake out to us. And we had the oldest and the youngest Marine in the company. It was really kind of neat.

It was a little break from the usual.

Yes, it was.

At the end of January, Tet began.

Yes. When I got back from Essex, I had completed my 6-month time in the field and was rotated to the battalion aid station. Corpsmen typically did only 6 months in the field and then they rotated to the battalion aid station. I went on R&R to Tokyo, came back, and picked up the battalion in Phu Bai. We had moved from An Hoa north to Phu Bai, about 20 miles south of Hue.

Then we got word that the MACV compound in Hue was overrun by North Vietnamese. We didn't have very good communications with them. So we sent a rifle company up--Golf Company--to probe the city just to find out exactly what was going on. I believe Golf Company went up there with a reinforced company--maybe 150 men. After about a week of fighting, they were down to about 40 men. They got ambushed really bad.

Then we all went up to the city by convoy and made our way to the MACV compound right on the Perfume River.

Did you go up Highway 1?

Yes.

Were there ambushes or was it pretty secure?

No, not on our way up. We didn't have any contact at all. It was a smooth ride from Phu Bai all the way to Hue. We were about a quarter of a mile from the MACV compound and then they started shooting at us. We had to get off the trucks and take cover along the streets. We fought our way down to the MACV compound where all the Army personnel and the American civilians were holed up. They had blockaded themselves into this compound. It was like a little Fort Apache. North Vietnamese were in the buildings. They were in the trees. They were in spider holes. They were everywhere.

The battalion worked its way across the street to the women's university and we set up our battalion aid station in there for a couple of days. Then we had to start fighting our way from that position down that side of the river going west. The next building across the street was the treasury building. We had to take that. Then the hospital, the yacht club, and then the governor's mansion, and then further on out.

This was something new. You had been to jungle warfare but this was urban warfare.

It was totally different. But I didn't get the combat town training that the Marines got. The Marines always trained their men in both environments--urban and jungle warfare. They have a "combat town" in Camp Pendleton and Camp Lejeune. They train them to fight in cities and in buildings. And that paid off because the Marines just clicked and turned into urban street fighters. And they just did a beautiful job.

How were you yourself working in this situation?

I was with the forward battalion aid station. We had one surgeon with us--Dr. [Joseph] Buchignani. We called him Dr. Buck. He was from Memphis, TN. He was assigned from 1st Med Battalion to go with us. We had a small contingent of corpsmen and we carried our medical gear in big beach bags. We traveled with the battalion headquarters. Everywhere we stopped we set up a battalion aid station and they brought the casualties to us. We were in blown out buildings, in rooms, wherever we could find a place to set up that was secure.

You had a traveling battalion aid station.

Correct. A forward battalion aid station.

You were constantly moving as they advanced throughout the city.

As they moved, we moved. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines were going in the opposite direction that we were. We were going up the river; they were going down the river. The first or second night we were there, North Vietnamese sappers blew the bridge crossing the river. One of the rifle companies attempted to cross the bridge to get over to the Citadel side but were caught in a really bad cross fire on the bridge and had to pull back. That night or the next night is when the sappers blew the bridge.

Now you were seeing all kinds of wounds. I had talked to General [Ron] Christmas. He talked about the kinds of injuries you didn't see elsewhere because there were buildings ricocheting off concrete so there were all kinds of secondary missile wounds.

Yes. The majority of the wounds we had in Hue, from my observation, were head and upper chest wounds. And they were typically gunshot wounds because the snipers were really active. There were a lot of shrapnel wounds but the majority were gunshot wounds.

This was all on the south side of the river, what they call the new city. You must have treated a huge number of casualties. Do you remember any, in particular?

Yes. And some very poignant situations, too. One young Marine was brought by his comrades into our battalion aid station. He was shot in the chest and was having trouble breathing. We were all concentrating on treating him and all dealing with our own individual fear. This kid just sat up on the stretcher and yelled out really loud for his mom. Then he died.

Another young Marine was brought in wounded really bad. He died from internal bleeding that we just couldn't stop. He had played football against me in high school. I couldn't believe it.

Because snipers had zeroed in on the streets, we had lots of casualties. You had to run, one at a time, trying to get across the street. It was a heck of a job trying to find cover and retrieve those casualties because we were under heavy fire.

We had one chaplain I remember, Father [LT] Richard Demers. He was an unbelievable man. We'd get casualties--wounded Marines in the street. And we were doing everything we could to retrieve them without getting ourselves shot. We'd crawl into cars, throw ropes out to them--anything we could do to protect ourselves, too. I saw Father Demers on three different occasions stand up, calmly walk out into the street, pick a Marine up in his arms, turn his back to the fire, and walk back with him. He was 6 foot 4, a Notre Dame graduate and I never saw anything like that in my life.

You actually saw him do this?

We all saw him do it.

Did he come out of Hue okay?

He came unscathed. He sure did.

I'm sure you saw things like that going on all the time.

Yes. There were heroes everywhere. When Marines fight, they're a brotherhood. They fight as a unit, as a team. They would go out at night retrieving their dead. I can't say that about other military groups but our motto was, "You come back with your shield, or you come back on it." They would not leave anybody in the streets.

Once you stabilized your patients, you had to medevac them out. How did that operate?

We stabilized them at the forward battalion station and once we were comfortable that we had done that, we would transfer him usually by jeep or mule--that little four-wheel platform vehicle the Marines had--back down the street toward the MACV compound. Outside the compound was a helo pad. The casualty would go down there to the 1st Battalion aid station surgeon and he would restabilize them and then put them on a chopper. They were then flown to Phu Bai for the 1st Med Battalion surgeons to take care of.

It worked really well. We didn't keep casualties there very long. I attribute the number of Marines who were saved to the medevac system that worked so well.

Were you pretty well set up for medical supplies?

LTCOL [Ernest] Cheatham was our battalion commander. He told Dr. Buck that we would get anything we needed. And he lived up to that because we never ran out of anything. We were supplied all the time and our needs were met.

While all this was going on there in Hue, Tet was going on in the rest of the country. Were you aware that the entire country was being attacked simultaneously?

Not at first. Then it started creeping in on us. We began hearing rumors and other news. But not for a while. We were not totally aware of that. Hue was our little world and that was it.

You were in your own little world--the battalion aid station. You had no idea what was going on outside as far as how the battle was progressing.

We heard little bits and pieces of what was going on but we were so busy and had very little sleep. The casualties were coming in constantly so we had no time to dwell on those things.

How many corpsmen were you working with in this battalion aid station?

Dr. Buck was the battalion surgeon and, I think we had five or six corpsmen. The rest of the corpsmen were at the battalion aid station in Phu Bai. We were the advanced mobile battalion aid station.

Where there individual corpsmen going out with the Marine patrols and taking buildings?

Oh, yeah. Each rifle company had their contingent of corpsmen, and everywhere the rifle companies, platoons, and squads went a corpsman went with them. We had quite a few corpsmen who were wounded. Some were killed. We had our casualties, too.

Did you ever get to the north bank of the river?

No. I never crossed the river.

Lucky for you, I guess.

Yes. It was bad enough where we were.

How long did this fight for the south bank go on?

I was there about a month--28 days. Then it began stabilizing and calming down. Then the city was eventually secured.

During your time with the battalion aid station, did you ever treat any ARVN?

Occasionally we did. I think they had their own medical. We didn't see them too often.

Any civilians?

No. The civilians, more or less, packed up and left. We treated a French priest who had been hiding in a closet. He had been shot in the stomach. A North Vietnamese surgeon apparently operated on him and left him there. He had been in that closet 3 or 4 days before we found him. He was in pretty bad shape but he survived.

We found quite a few dead civilians--American civilians who had been executed. We found mass graves toward the end of the operation. I think there were some German peace corps workers who were killed.

Did you treat any NVA casualties?

There were some captured but we didn't see those. The only NVA we saw were dead.

What did Hue look like from your perspective, when things finally settled down?

It was a scene out of Dante. It was just devastation--blown out buildings. Some were still intact but when there were NVA in a building, the Marines' job was to get them out. And they were very efficient in doing that, but the buildings typically suffered.

When it was over, we started getting just the occasional casualty--from a loose sniper here and there, the small ambush. But the casualties really slowed down.

When the Marines finally moved across the river and attacked the Citadel, were you getting casualties from that, too?

No. We didn't get the casualties from the Citadel. They had their own battalion aid stations set up over there.

Where did you go after the battle for Hue ended?

From there I went back to Phu Bai. I talked to my battalion chief--Chief Legarie--and he sent me to the first Med Battalion in Danang. I worked in the lab there for 5 days. I think he did it just to give me a little break.

From there I went to a little outpost at Hai Van Pass. I was there about a week before I got my orders with my flight date. It was around March. I caught a jeep back to Phu Bai, got my orders, went to Danang, processed there, and then went to Okinawa.

Do you remember leaving Vietnam?

Absolutely. When I first got over there, I started smoking cigarettes. I had never smoked before. I must have smoked a pack and a half a day. Then when the plane left, I never smoked again.

What do you remember about the homecoming?

I had lost about 35 pounds and had really changed physically. I'd lost a lot of weight and was really haggard. I remember my mom and dad met me at the airport and my mom walked past; she didn't recognize me. It was just a quiet family homecoming.

Some of the other vets have told me that they had some issues trying to readjust to civilian life.

When you're with the military and particularly in a combat zone, you kind of develop your own language. There's a lot of crude language--cussing, etc. I had to phase that out and come back down to earth.

I didn't have problems with adjustment. I spent 22 years in the Navy. Toward the end of my career, I started having some memory situations about the war and some issues I had to deal with--post traumatic stress things. I don't think I've met a man who went over there and saw combat who hasn't dealt with issues after that. They didn't know anything about post traumatic

stress at the time. Now they know everything in the world about it and they're able to deal with it. And I'm glad. In a way, it's sad that I didn't get that initial deprogramming and treatment that would have helped me. I don't blame the military for that; they did their best. But they learned from us. Now the young men and women who experience combat are a lot better off when they come home. If that deprogramming isn't done, that stress stays inside and one day it will find different ways of coming out. And it can happen 20 or 30 years later.

How did it come out in your case?

Bad dreams. Hyper awareness to my surroundings. Different smells would set off memories. Diesel fumes was the biggest one of all. The pop, pop, pop of a Huey flying overhead would bring back memories. But I worked my way out of all that and I think we all had to deal with it in their own way.

So you spent about 22 years in the Navy?

I had broken service. When I came home from Vietnam I got out for 3 years and worked as an OR technician in Atlanta. Then I went back in the Navy. I missed it too much. The service was good to me. It made some promises to me when I was a young man. The recruiter said, "You're 19 years old and if you do a good job and do what you're told to do, wear a good squared away uniform, always be on time, work hard, you can retire relatively young." And I did those things. And the Navy lived up to their promises.

When did you retire?

In 1989 as a chief.

What do you do now?

I'm retired now. I got married a year before I retired and my wife and I moved to Salem, OR. I had a daughter and she was the light of my life. I got to raise her. I got to be a "Mr. Mom" for about 10 years while my wife worked. It was an experience I always wanted to do. It was one of the most wonderful things I've ever experienced.

Where do you live now?

Covington, GA. It's about 30 miles outside of Atlanta. My two brothers live here. My mom lives in Conyers, GA. My wife and I are both retired now and we do what we want to do. My daughter is in high school as of this fall.

It's been about 37 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much anymore?

I don't. The memories are there, but I think that since I've been dealing with the issues the way I did and had the help I did in dealing with them, it's just a memory now. For a while it was a bad thing. It evoked a lot of bad memories and I suffered because of it. But now it's just a memory. And I owe it all to the Navy. They got me through it. They were patient with me and they were very good to me. I can't say enough about the Marine Corps.

I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon.

I'm just flattered that you would consider talking with me.

It was a great pleasure and honor for me.

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